

## **Iraqis in America Proud to Vote in Council of Representatives Election**

### **Iraqi Ambassador to U.S. and Senator Richard Lugar Praise Cooperation**

By M. Scott Bortot

Washington — Iraqis living in America are heading to election centers nationwide from March 5-7 to vote for the 325 members of Iraq's Council of Representatives. For Iraqis living in America, this vote is meaningful because it is the first time out-of-country Iraqis will be able to vote for the Council of Representatives.

At a press conference held March 5 marking the vote at a polling station in Arlington, Virginia Senator Richard G. Lugar, the ranking Republican on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, praised Iraqi-American election cooperation.

"I'm certain that all of my colleagues in the Senate and all Americans pray for the success of the elections in America and in Iraq," Senator Lugar said.

Joining Senator Lugar at the conference, Iraq's Ambassador to the U.S. Samir Sumaida'ie thanked the American people for the sacrifices they have made in securing Iraq's future.

"Today marks a transition into a new era of more stability and more progress for Iraq," Ambassador Sumaida'ie said of the elections. "We want all people to see that the elections are conducted openly, transparently and freely."

The estimated 200,000 eligible Iraqi voters living in America are joining some two million Iraqis in 16 countries for the three-day vote. At nine polling stations across the U.S., Iraqis can vote by showing proof of Iraqi citizenship, age and a connection to one of the country's 18 governorates. Iraq will hold its elections on March 7 in which 18 million eligible voters can make their voice heard.

At the Arlington, Virginia polling center Iraqis were enthusiastic about casting their votes in America. Iraqi-American Dana Aziz said the voting in America means a lot to him.

"I'm very proud of this day in which we have the right to vote as Iraqis in the United States," Aziz said. "It is a chance for the Iraqi people to express themselves through this election."

Arranging the Out of Country Voting (OCV) in the U.S. was the task of the Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) — also responsible for elections inside Iraq. According to IHEC legal adviser Majdi Khouri, IHEC employees from Iraq flew to the U.S. at the end of January to lay the groundwork for the polling centers.

Around 350 people nationwide worked with on OCV preparation. Election organizers held meetings in Iraqi-American communities and utilized the Internet and newspapers to promote the vote.

Khouri thanked American officials for helping with IHEC's election preparation efforts.

“The cooperation has been great in terms of security and organization,” Khouri said. “They have also been helpful in providing materials and helping us overcome any obstacles.”

Iraqi-born Abdul-Sattar Al-Obaidi, who also voted in Arlington, said there are two kinds of Iraqis voting in this election in America: those who hold dual U.S.-Iraqi citizenship are voting for the people they still care about in Iraq whereas recently arrived Iraqis to the U.S. are voting as if they are still in Iraq.

Despite the differences in perspective, both types of Iraqis voting in America share a common bond said Al-Obaidi.

“We hope these elections lead to stability by selecting new people better able to run the county in accordance with the law.”